



Holmes County, Mississippi

■ OVERVIEW

The sprawling Mississippi Delta is a place defined by its contrasts—literary giants and uneducated masses, abundant land and a meager economy, and, in particular, immense wealth and extreme poverty. Kenneth Dean, executive director of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations, described a typical poor Delta family of the 1960s as being “actually too poor to

participate in a poverty program.” These families were characteristically large, female-headed households that struggled to get by, often on subsistence diets and in homes lacking insulation, refrigeration, and indoor plumbing.¹ This was life in the Delta.

These days, life in this region is not much different. Holmes County, Mississippi, situated in the center of the state and in the midst of the Delta, is the specific area that was researched for this case study report. With a 2000 poverty rate of more than 41 percent, Holmes County is both geographically and economically isolated.² In some ways, time there has stood still. Beverly Brown of the Holmes County Health Department relayed

the story of a 23-year-old woman with three children who lives in a trailer with no running water or refrigerator, yet pays rent that is 45 percent of her monthly income. Local business owner Zelpha Whatley, who departed Holmes County for Illinois in 1968, noted, “When I left, the courthouse clock wasn’t working, and when I came back 30 years later, it still wasn’t working.”

■ BACKGROUND

Historically, the Mississippi Delta was a source of agricultural bounty. Spanning seven states, the lower Delta contains a broad, nutrient-rich alluvial plain situated between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in the state of

TABLE 1

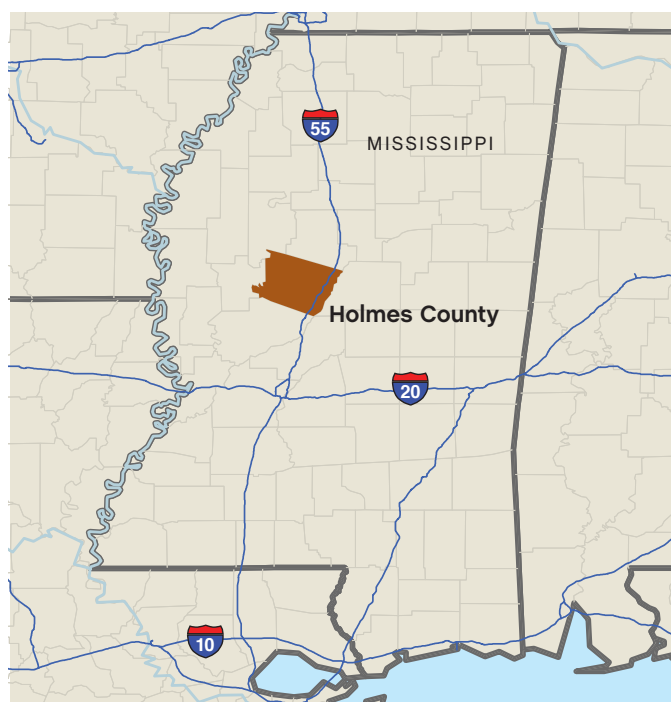
Comparison Statistics

		Holmes County	Mississippi non-metro
Poverty Rate	Poverty rate 1970 ^a	62.2	NA
	Poverty rate 2000 ^b	41.1	22.8
Income	Median household income ^c	\$17,235	\$27,921
Demographics	Population 2000 ^d	21,609	1,628,497
	% Population change, 1970 - 2000 ^e	-6.5	14.1
	Racial/ethnic composition, 2000 ^f		
	% White	20.2	58.2
	% Hispanic/Latino	0.7	1.3
	% Black/African-American	78.2	39.1
	% Residents under age 18 ^g	32.1	27.3
	% Single-parent households ^h	28.6	12.5
	% Foreign born, 2000 ⁱ	0.3	1.1
	% Population in same house as five years ago ^j	68.9	21.7
Education	% Adults without a high school diploma, 2000 ^k	40.3	31.5
	% Adults with a college degree, 2000 ^l	11.2	14.2
	% Students proficient in reading, 2005 ^m	60.9	74.5
	% Students proficient in math, 2005 ⁿ	55.8	74.4
Labor Market	Unemployment rate, 2000 ^o	17.3	8.1
	% Adults in the labor force ^p	49.0	56.4
Housing	Homeownership rate, 2000 ^q	73.3	73.4
	% Renters with a housing cost burden ^r	41.6	40.7
	Median value for owner-occupied units ^s	\$44,900	\$61,196
	Median year structure built ^t	1974	1977
Access to Credit	% Credit files that are thin, 2004 ^u	22.0	26.3
	% Credit files with high credit scores ^v	33.9	41.0
	% Mortgage originations that are high cost, 2005 ^w	41.3	40.6
	Mortgage denial rate, 2005 ^x	35.2	26.6

Mississippi. For generations Deltans experienced life in “a cotton-intoxicated area” where “cotton-growing was a secular religion.”³ Rupert Vance described the Delta of the 1930s as “the cotton-obsessed, Negro-obsessed Delta, the deepest South.”⁴ The Delta’s plantation-based economy led Vance to observe that “nowhere are antebellum conditions so nearly preserved than in the Yazoo Delta.”⁵

Two social scientists who studied and recorded life in the Delta of the 1930s observed that the anachronistic, contradictory, and complex social system there was linked inextricably to the Delta’s plantation-based economy. John Dollard and Hortense Powdermaker documented

numerous examples of the economic advantages offered whites by the existing caste system.⁶ Share-cropping, for instance, was the preferred arrangement that supplied white land owners with black farm laborers in exchange for a share of the crop. Yet one black woman in her fifties told Powdermaker that in 36 years of farming, she and her husband had only cleared money six times. Many planters ran commissaries for their workers and advanced groceries and needed supplies to them, often at an interest rate of 20 to 25 percent. White planters rationalized this practice by asserting that the only hope of getting blacks to work was to keep them in debt or at a subsistence level. Wrote Powdermaker, “[The] rules on



which the sharecropping system was based were broken more often than followed.⁷

However, as Delta planters increasingly utilized mechanization and federal farm programs, the need for cheap farm labor diminished. The Delta's rural farm population decreased by 54 percent between 1950 and 1960.⁸ While cotton continued to reign, the Delta's plantation-based economy changed.

In 1990, journalist Rheta Grimsley Johnson described the Delta as “the only place left in America with bona fide shacks and mansions side by side with not enough middle class to blunt the disparity.” Efforts to cultivate industry and local businesses met with little success, with one local leader observing that “people on Wall Street see more attractive investments in Venezuela than in the Mississippi Delta.”⁹ Today, the Delta struggles to find its place in the modern economy.

Like other Delta communities, Holmes County has followed a path of economic decline. Agriculture was predominant until about 30 years ago, and despite the presence of several major employers in Holmes County, including University Hospital & Clinics, several mobile home and modular housing manufacturers, as well as suppliers to the automotive industry, the county has lost many jobs over the past few decades—and continues to do so. For example, manufacturing employment in Holmes County fell from 1,021 in 1980 to 624 in 2004.¹⁰

Overall, private nonfarm employment in Holmes County decreased by 14 percent from 2000 to 2005, according to the Delta Council's 2006 Economic Progress Report.¹¹

Unemployment and household income figures in the county reflect this trend. Unemployment in 2000 stood at 17 percent, and in one area of the county this rate approached 31 percent. In comparison, peer counties in Mississippi had a 14 percent unemployment rate. The median family income in Holmes County in 2000 was \$21,757—the lowest of the state's 18 Delta counties. By 2004, this figure had improved to \$27,304, but this only bumped Holmes to second-lowest in this ranking.¹² Holmes County is thus one of the poorest counties in one of the poorest regions in the United States.

■ ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Holmes County's leaders and residents noted three dominant issues that are key to understanding the concentration of poverty in the area. First is the dual problem of lack of jobs and lack of skilled workers, which in tandem contributes to a stagnant local economy. Second, the historical legacy of the Delta has created a weak foundation upon which to build a modern economy. Third, leadership at all levels is inadequate for addressing the most pressing issues that face the community and its residents. Finally, a myriad of other challenges—including a two-tiered educational system, inadequate housing, and poor health—serve as additional barriers to residents of this impoverished area improving their lives.

Lack of Jobs and Skilled Workers

In interviews many local residents noted the economic growth taking place in other areas of the Delta, including the Nissan manufacturing plant in nearby Canton. Holmes County, on the other hand, has not been able to capitalize on such opportunities; in fact, while some Holmes County residents have been able to find work at the Nissan plant in Canton, most of the plant's management and many of its workers are from outside the region. Many who applied were not even able to get into the training program offered by the plant.¹³ Community advocates also noted that only one Nissan supplier has located in Holmes County.¹⁴ Several community leaders noted that the county is well-positioned geographically to take advantage of the growth of the Jackson metro area to the south, with its location along Interstate 55. But to do so, said one, “The county must change its

image and the perception of it to take advantage of this window of opportunity, or the growth [will] bypass it.”¹⁵

More troubling for community leaders is the county’s lack of a comprehensive economic development plan. They point to an industrial park created more than eight years ago without an accompanying specific strategy to attract businesses there; the park, at present, sits empty.¹⁶ Many noted the need for greater collaboration. Said one, “[We] can’t get enough people to work together to create jobs.”¹⁷

In addition, skills have not been adequately developed in the local workforce. One well-respected community leader said that young people reach the age of 21 without ever having really worked and lacking the skills necessary to sustain themselves, which makes it hard for the county to attract industry.¹⁸ Dr. Martha Davis of the Mallory Health Clinic echoes this sentiment. She has seen people who come to the clinic looking for work not knowing what job they want or what skills they have to offer. While technical training programs are offered at Holmes Community College for fields such as welding and licensed practical nursing, those students who are able to take advantage of these programs struggle; typically, only about half of those who start such programs complete them.¹⁹ Those who do complete training programs may have trouble getting connected to a job, perhaps due in part, noted several leaders, to the focus of some training programs on the number of people completing training, rather than on job placement.²⁰

Minimum-wage jobs, then, are the norm in Holmes County. Many residents catch the “poultry bus” to chicken processing plants in Morton and Carthage, MS for night-shift jobs that pay on average \$7 to \$8 per hour.²¹ Others simply don’t enter the workforce. “We’ve had 2 or 3 generations born into this situation where neither parent had a job,” said one community advocate. “The social net of the 1960s and 1970s created a lack of respect for working and earning what you need.”²² One local resident observed, “It’s a cycle. If your parents are just sitting around watching soap operas, then that’s all you know.”²³

The Historical Legacy of a Two-Tiered Economy

The historical legacy of the Delta’s extremes, which still echoes today in Holmes County, provides a poor foundation on which to build a modern economy. In 1949, political scientist V.O. Key observed that “in the agrarian economy of the Mississippi sort, no great middle class—

not even an agrarian middle class—dulls the abruptness of the line between lord and serf.”²⁴ Not much has changed in the 21st century. Consider a recent *Washington Post* article that reported that the nation’s current farm policy has “helped preserve a two-tiered economy and a widening chasm between the races, according to local residents, government officials and researchers.”²⁵

Federal farm policy often rewards land owners with bigger farms, and these land owners tend to be white. Of the \$1.2 billion the federal government spent on agricultural subsidies from 2001 to 2005, only 5 percent went to black farmers and 95 percent went to large, commercial farms that are overwhelmingly owned by white farmers.²⁶ The contrast is also great between funds that the Agriculture Department awards for subsidies in the Delta versus funds that are allocated to rural development programs for housing, business development, and infrastructure. From 2001 to 2005, approximately \$1.18 billion went to farm subsidies in the Delta, while just \$54.8 million went to rural development programs in Delta communities.²⁷

Even the new industries that are slowly replacing agriculture contribute to a two-tiered wage structure. The catfish industry, for instance, provided many jobs in the 1990s; however, wages were so low that even full-time employment did not raise workers above the poverty line. One large Delta catfish plant paid an average wage in 1990 that was more than \$4,400 below the poverty-level income for a single parent with three children, though its personnel department did help employees apply for public assistance.²⁸

This two-tiered economy lacks a viable middle class, hindering cooperative efforts and the growth of community institutions that could aid progress. The planter economy that dominated the Delta’s social and economic landscape for much of the past 100 years did not have a need for a middle class; not surprisingly, one has never thrived there.²⁹ Because of that lack of a middle class in Holmes County, many community leaders see “too great of a divide” between whites and blacks.³⁰ This divide perpetuates the community’s “plantation mentality,” where power continues to rest in the hands of a few, creating a culture of dependence for the rest.³¹ At least one community stakeholder feels that race relations have improved somewhat. “I’ve seen where we’ve come from and we’re better,” he said, though “we’re still not where we need to be.”³²

A recurring theme in Holmes County is that this two-tiered economy is mirrored in social structures and organizations, forestalling the development of trust that



The Mississippi Delta has been described as a land of great contrasts, among them the significant wealth of some residents and extreme poverty of others.

is needed in order for residents to coordinate and cooperate. “People live this way because they are used to it,” said one community advocate, “and there is not a vision of a different way.”³³ Many local residents and community leaders noted that there were few organizations or vehicles for bringing the entire community together and even fewer opportunities for young people.³⁴ “We must come together for the development of the community,” explained Robert Clark, “but to do that we must be shown a different way of working together.”³⁵

Leadership, Organizational Capacity, and Trust

The two-tiered structure that permeates the area and creates a climate of distrust also deters leaders and organizations from fostering cooperation and addressing key issues. Local residents and leaders talked about the lack of collaboration in the county. One echoed many others in citing a lack of collaboration among the county’s seven municipalities, with each town “doing its own thing.”³⁶ A few social services providers talked about the need for better coordination or even a one-stop center for services for low-income residents.³⁷

Disparities in funding contribute to the climate of distrust. Many community leaders expressed that Holmes County does not get its fair share of available state funding. “With Holmes County being at the bottom, you would think money and programs would be coming in,” commented Calvin Head of the West Holmes Community Development Corporation, “but it seems that Holmes has

been forgotten.”³⁸ According to several local leaders, state funding for programs in Holmes County was not enough to meet the county’s needs.³⁹ One said that the state paid lip service to the Delta but “their attention is on the coast.”⁴⁰ According to one regional leader, Holmes County was part of an Empowerment Zone in the Delta, comprising a larger part of the zone geographically but receiving less of the actual funding.⁴¹ Two leaders of state agencies offered a different perspective, pointing out that state funding has been directed to Holmes County projects, but that capacity of organizations there has not been sufficiently developed.⁴²

Another issue is the lack of expertise among—and a general shortage of—local organizations. One nonprofit leader acknowledged that “Holmes could get more, but people don’t want to put forth the effort. And with limited staff and all you have to do, it’s hard.”⁴³ Local organizations may not be fully aware of funding and assistance programs that are available. In addition, many programs now have greater paperwork requirements, and some organizations either lack the expertise to fill out the paperwork or else see more costs than benefits in completing the necessary forms and documents.⁴⁴ And the county simply lacks nonprofits, a deficiency pointed out by several representatives of state agencies and intermediaries who were interviewed for this report.⁴⁵

The lack of planning and vision for the community has a significant impact on the capacity levels and outlook of residents. One local leader observed, “The resources are out there but we are not ready. We have not come together to say what we want and to come up with a plan.”⁴⁶ Other community leaders talked about the tendency in the county to discuss problems but not to develop solutions,⁴⁷ while several business and government leaders noted the desire to maintain the status quo.⁴⁸ Several residents pointed to the complete change in elected leadership racially from 30 or 40 years ago alongside the county’s overall lack of progress.⁴⁹ One local resident talked about becoming dispirited, explaining that she and others “would participate in stuff then nothing comes of it. It turns me off.” Still another resident said the “apathy here is overwhelming.”⁵⁰

Education, Housing, and Health

Struggling local school systems and low levels of educational attainment also pose challenges for economic development in Holmes. Holmes County schools

were under state control for a year after failing to meet 44 accreditation standards. According to the 2001 State Report Card for Holmes County Schools, students lagged behind the state standards for reading and math proficiency and exceeded the state average high school dropout rate.⁵¹ Many community leaders pointed out the continued racial duality in educating the county's youth, with a public school system that is 100 percent African American and a local private school that is predominantly white.⁵² Of Holmes County's population age 25 and older just 60 percent has earned a high school diploma, and only 11 percent a bachelor's degree.⁵³

Inadequate housing conditions also pose a challenge for Holmes County. Holmes County has a higher percentage of low-income homeowners who live in a home with a major issue, such as lack of complete plumbing facilities, than peer Mississippi counties.⁵⁴ Many community leaders spoke of residents without running water or electricity.⁵⁵ A regional housing official noted that approximately half of the owner-occupied units in the county are in poor condition, yet there is really no one addressing the housing quality needs.⁵⁶ In addition, several social services providers noted that many residents are burdened by the cost of shelter, and that large numbers of local residents live with parents or other relatives "because they can't afford their own housing or it's not available in their price range."⁵⁷

In addition, health conditions are grim in Mississippi in general, and in the Delta and Holmes County in particular. The State of Mississippi sees high infant mortality rates and has the highest obesity rate in the country.⁵⁸ In the Delta, the incidence of chronic conditions such as heart disease and high blood pressure exceeds the national average. Holmes County is among the top 10 counties in Mississippi for stroke mortality rates⁵⁹ and also has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the state.⁶⁰

In Holmes County, some comprehensive efforts are under way to change conditions and improve lives. One such effort is spearheaded by the West Holmes Community Development Corporation (CDC), which just completed the second year of a broad, integrative program to address the challenges of sustainable agriculture, youth employment and skills development, and health and nutrition concerns for the elderly. First, the CDC got several local farmers to agree to set aside some acreage for the production of fresh produce. Local youth working in a CDC program were then trained to cultivate and reap the produce, tasks for which they earned a stipend. The

CDC arranged for this harvested produce to be eligible for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) vouchers used by seniors and low-income residents. A produce market set up in front of the local WIC warehouse made access to this fresh produce easier for WIC recipients, and also afforded the youth involved in the program to sell the produce directly to the public.⁶¹

■ CONCLUSION

The Mississippi Delta is indeed a land of contrasts. A 1990 report by the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission described the region as a place where "jobs are scarce and job skills training almost unknown; where infant mortality rates rival those in the Third World; where dropping out of school and teenage pregnancy are commonplace; where capital for small farmers and small businesses is severely limited; where good housing and health care are unattainable for many...[and] where illiteracy reigns as a supreme piece of irony: the region has produced some of the best writers and the worst readers in America."⁶²

But change is afoot. One regional effort to promote change and growth in the Delta is the Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta Region, created by the Mississippi legislature in 2006. According to the task force's report, "Mississippi Delta at the Crossroads," up to that time there had been "no long range, state-held vision or plan in place to change the Delta."⁶³ The task force is working on initiatives that will impact the entire region, including improving housing, creating an economic incentive zone, improving education and daycare, developing a cultural tourism initiative, marketing the region, creating health insurance plans for children focusing on preventive care, and developing a teen pregnancy prevention and parental development initiative.⁶⁴ The task force will also catalog and coordinate current programs in the Delta, with the goal of increasing support for work under way as well as for new initiatives.

While the issues facing residents of Holmes County may seem insurmountable, community leaders are optimistic and view the people and natural assets of the county as building blocks for a viable community.⁶⁵ "Our greatest strength is our people," noted Mallory Community Health Center's Dr. Martha Davis. "We could do anything we want to do if we could come together as one."⁶⁶ By addressing its most pressing issues, the leaders of Holmes County can position the area to take

advantage of growth to the south and bring opportunity to its residents.

This case study was prepared by Ellen Eubank, community affairs manager, formerly of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Endnotes

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